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ABSTRACT

The processes and components of self-esteem derive from the context or value system (culture) in which people live. A shift in the values of American society, especially within the last 50 years, has placed Americans in a no-win situation with respect to self-esteem. The everyday pressures of survival in a highly competitive and complex world that defines success and the "good life" in terms of the acquisition of material wealth causes Americans to neglect and, at times, violate an important dimension of self-definition: the moral dimension. Many Americans suffer from a prevailing sense of emptiness and chronic low self-esteem. Personal and social responsibility are two fundamental components of self-esteem. The degree to which individuals achieve that which is good for both others and themselves is, in large part, a function of the degree to which individuals take personal responsibility for their actions and exert personal control over their lives. The value system which now governs Americans' lives has come about as a function of the economic, political, and technological transformations of American culture. Americans need to re-establish the tradition of carrying on a public discourse about what constitutes the "good life" and the "good self." (ABL)

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Valuing the Self:

Understanding the Nature of Self-Esteem

by Susan Hales, Ph.D.



INTRODUCTION

The importance of self-esteem for healthy human functioning has long been recognized by social scientists. Its significance for understanding human interaction comes from the recognition that the desire to protect or enhance self-esteem has significant consequences for the quality of our lives. Indeed, many psychologists have observed that individuals seeking therapeutic help often suffer from compounded feelings of helplessness and inadequacy in coping with the problems of everyday life events, and from the inability to develop and maintain close relationships. In short, they feel insecure, incompetent, and lonely, and they have low self-esteem.

Numerous social science studies have documented a link between low self-esteem and such social ills as juvenile delinquency, violent crime, drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, child and spousal abuse, chronic welfare dependency, and

school failure. This link led to the creation, in September 1986, of the California State Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility. John Vasconcellos, the Assemblyman who proposed the Task Force, reasoned that directing the state's resources toward nurturing the development of high self-esteem might reduce the incidence of these social problems by intervening at one of their root causes — low self-esteem.¹ Not only could efforts aimed at encouraging the development of high self-esteem produce healthier, happier citizens, such efforts could also substantially reduce the \$36 billion dollars these problems cost California citizens each year.

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The publicity that the California Self-Esteem Task Force has generated (which was given a considerable boost by the debunking it received in Garry Trudeau's comic strip "Doonesbury") has brought self-esteem to the attention of the general public. Along with this burgeoning interest has come a desire to understand the nature and dynamics of self-esteem and how it can be developed and nurtured. We must take time to understand the nature of self-esteem,

otherwise our well-intentioned efforts to foster its development may actually hinder it.

Questions such as Who am I? What is "the good life"? Why should I be moral? and Was Socrates right when he said "An unexamined life is not worth living"? have long been at the heart of philosophical discourse. The human struggle inherent in these questions has been portrayed in such expressive art forms as Greek dramas, Russian novels, and American cinema. Most recently, Woody Allen's movie, "Crimes and Misdemeanors," captures this struggle in a way that reflects the complexities and pain of contemporary life. This movie also, by coincidence, gives life to many of the arguments that I present in this article as I uncover the connections among self-esteem, morality, and society. I will show that not only are our identities formed largely out of our moral choices and actions, but that we feel best about ourselves, and the best feelings we can have about ourselves occur, when we act in a moral way. There is a direct connection between self-esteem and personal and social responsibility.

The Nature and Dynamics of Self-Esteem

Our self-concept reflects our knowledge about ourself in relation to the world. It is constituted of what we know about our attributes, for example, intelligence, physical strength, special talents, moral character, attitudes, beliefs, values, and desires. In other words, our self-concept expresses and consists of our self-knowledge or self-understanding.²

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*Self-esteem is the evaluative function of the self-concept. It has two components: evaluative and affective. Self-esteem is the affective — or emotional — experience of the evaluations we make, and customarily maintain, with respect to our personal worth. Given what we know about who we are, do we believe we have value, significance, worth? How do we feel about who we assess ourselves to be? Do we like ourselves?

The affective or emotional component of self-esteem is what makes self-esteem a significant variable in understanding human functioning. Self-feelings are experienced in terms of such sentiments as pride, shame, guilt, and self-contempt. A person with low self-esteem might express the following kinds of self-sentiments: "I'm a failure," "No one likes me," "I wish I could have more self-respect." People with high self-esteem feel confident, valuable, worthwhile and have self-respect.

The Motivational Significance of Self-Esteem

Because positive self-evaluations are emotionally pleasurable and negative self-evaluations are painful, we are generally motivated to maximize positive and minimize negative self-attitudes. This motive, referred to as the self-esteem motive, takes the form of a need to enhance, protect, or repair self-esteem, and has a significant influence on our behavior.

Self-esteem affects our behavior in many ways. Anticipating the painful emotional experience of failing to live up to our personal aspirations can motivate us to try harder, and to persevere in order to succeed. Conversely, fear of the pain that accompanies a sudden drop in self-esteem experienced as a result of failure can lead us to avoid challenging situations altogether. This latter phenomenon is referred to by social psychologists as "fear of failure."

Fear of failure motivation permeates all aspects of our lives, but most of us are familiar with its occurrence in the school classroom, where it significantly interferes with children's

opportunities to learn. In American society, the competitive, achievement-reward structure of the classroom unfortunately soon teaches children that their value as a person depends largely on their ability to achieve.

As Martin Covington and Richard Berry have shown in their book, *Self-Worth and School Learning*,* the competitive atmosphere of the classroom creates conflict between children who have the ability to do well in school and those who do not. Children with academic ability gain their self-esteem from recognition and praise for their academic achievements. They are cooperative and accommodating and find the school context a relatively rewarding place to

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be. By contrast, children with less academic ability are confronted with frequent failures and must attempt to protect their self-esteem through alternative and sometimes self-defeating modes of behavior. Children with low academic ability are not necessarily less intelligent or less capable. They may simply have acquired less academic knowledge and skills because they were educationally disadvantaged due to social or familial background. Their opportunities to remedy their initial deficits, however, are thwarted in the competitive atmosphere of the classroom because of their fear of failure.

For children with low ability, fear of failure motivation may cause them to employ failure-avoidance strategies such as cheating, little or no effort, or procrastination. These children do not exert much effort because if they try hard and fail, they must directly confront the painful knowledge of

their low ability. If they do not try, they can attribute failure to lack of effort. In other words, this reasoning allows them to "fail with honor." Alternatively, some children of low ability attempt to gain self-worth through acting up in class, thereby gaining the admiration of their peers for their "courage" to defy adult authority. Still other low ability children may seek to gain self-esteem through rejecting academics and excelling in athletics.

The irony of these self-protective strategies is that they are self-defeating. Although these strategies may bring temporary relief, they increase the likelihood that children will continue to fail because the strategies prevent scholastic learning. The children fall farther and farther behind. Their lack of academic achievement, in turn, severely limits their subsequent educational and occupational aspirations. A vicious cycle of low achievement and low self-esteem is set in motion. In short, the need to avoid the painful experience of failure in order to protect self-esteem, interacting with the competitive achievement-reward structure of the classroom, creates one of the main obstacles to school learning. The "no win" situation that typifies the classroom context is one of the unintended and seriously negative consequences of the current educational structure.

Understanding fear of failure motivation also helps us explain why depressed individuals resist efforts to increase their self-esteem. Because people who are depressed anticipate that their self-esteem may be lowered through interaction with others or by failure in achievement settings, they chronically devalue themselves, avoid challenging tasks, and resist attempts by others to help them increase their self-esteem. Although this self-protective strategy prevents the potentially greater discomfort experienced when a sudden drop in self-esteem occurs, it prohibits these individuals from taking the kind of actions that would free them from their chronically low self-esteem.

Self-Efficacy: The Key to Self-Esteem

Whereas most theorists of self-esteem emphasize the importance of competence and a sense of self-efficacy (the experience of one's self as a causal agent in one's world) as the major determinants of self-esteem, I have found that moral integrity is also significant. Although I also view self-efficacy as critical to self-esteem, I will illustrate how we derive feelings of self-efficacy through achievement in the morality as well as competence domains of behavior.

For the most part, self-esteem is earned. *One person cannot give another self-esteem. The key to self-esteem lies in our active involvement with and effective use of our self-powers.* In order to have high self-esteem, we must be actively engaged in confronting the challenges of everyday life and we must experience the sense of self-efficacy that comes from successfully meeting these challenges. A sense of self-efficacy comes from the experience of being a causal agent in one's environment. The experience of self-efficacy is a pleasurable one; it is the simple but profound joy of making choices, taking action, creating, or, simply put, causing positive change in our environment.

What exactly do I mean by self-powers, and how are they related to a sense of self-efficacy? Our two primary self-powers are our mental and physical capabilities; in other words, our intelligence and our physical strength, skill, and stamina. Intellectual powers are generally more important than physical powers for self-esteem, but their relative importance will vary among individuals. It is the active involvement and effective use of our intellectual and/or physical capabilities that is at the base of our sense of self-efficacy and thus self-esteem.

Understanding the nature of self-efficacy is fundamental to understanding the nature of self-esteem. We can witness the motivation for and experience of self-efficacy in the behavior of infants, puppies, and

kittens as they first learn a cause-effect relationship with the world.⁴ Those of you who are parents can remember watching your infant delight at the recognition that it was his or her own action of throwing the baby rattle out of the crib that caused the rattling noise as it hit the floor. The baby's glee comes from the experience of itself as a causal agent. As a mother or father, you may have returned the rattle to the baby only to witness it being thrown out of the crib again and again. There is no question that the baby experiences a purely physiological pleasure at these moments. It is precisely this joyful pleasure, inherent in the act of being a cause, that is the essential dynamic of self-esteem. The difference between the child and the adult is that the types of activities that adults can efficaciously engage in are largely determined by the cultural values of our society. Ultimately, however, the dynamic in infancy and in adulthood is the same: we gain real physiological pleasure from the active and effective use of our self-powers.

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Initially, the child's glee at experiencing power comes from recognizing that his or her actions resulted in the rattling sound as the rattle hits the floor, an action in the physical world. Subsequently, the child recognizes that he or she can cause the mother or father to retrieve the rattle, an action in the social world. Many theorists of self-esteem and lay persons alike mistakenly assume that when we speak of the importance of a sense of self-efficacy to self-esteem, we are speaking only of inanimate objects in the physical world. This is not so. We develop a sense of self-ef-

ficacy and experience the joy of being a source of power by producing intended effects in the social realm as well.

As in our encounters in the physical world, we learn through experience what effects we can have on other people. People may be less predictable than inanimate objects because they are conscious and willful, and the consequences of failure may be more painful, but if we are able to get people to like us, help us, love us, and let us help and love them, we experience ourselves as causally effective in the social world. *The fact that approval and acceptance from others are based on our behavior, and thus give us feedback about the kind of person we are, is the primary reason why this approval has such significance for our self-esteem.*

The approval and acceptance of others is important not only because it gives us feedback about our effectiveness and acceptability, but also because we are thoroughly social beings with strong needs for affiliation. Intimate relationships with others are fundamentally necessary for our well-being; to be able to give and receive love is critical to our happiness. Our needs for affiliation will not be met, however, if we are not judged by others to be worthy of their friendship, love, and support. In short, the degree to which we are successful in establishing and maintaining friendships and/or romantic love relationships with the people we admire, and otherwise enjoy, is also a function of our own behavior.

At the extreme negative end of self-efficacy are feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, and inferiority. The emotional response is to despair, the behavioral response is to give up — we cease to try.

Processes of Self-Esteem: The Two Sources of Self-Evaluative Information

Many self-esteem theorists consider self-esteem to have two sources: an internal source, based on one's history of successes in dealing with the environment, and an external

source, based on our perceptions of approval from people who are important to us. William James, one of the founding fathers of psychology, is most often cited as the major proponent of the inner source of self-esteem. In James' Ideal-Actual Self Theory, self-esteem is based on personal judgments of one's own achievement; it is a function of the ratio over time of one's successes to one's pretensions. In making these personal judgments, we apply a set of learned standards that are mutually shared.

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By contrast, sociologists most often emphasize the view that self-esteem is the result of external sources of influence. Here, self-esteem is believed to result from internalizing the evaluative attitudes of others as one's own self-attitudes. This perspective is often referred to as the "Looking Glass Self;" we see ourselves as others see us.

A third perspective, social comparison theory, emphasizes an interactive process in which self-esteem is considered to be a function of personal evaluations that are made by comparing one's capabilities and attributes with appropriate peers (i.e., if we are amateur tennis players, we would not compare our performance to professionals but to other amateurs).

In sum, these three traditions of research have identified three processes of self-esteem formation: internal and external judgments and social comparisons. What is the basis for these judgments? If we examine each position, we will see that, in general, both one's own personal self-judgments and the judgments by others

are a function of our own behavior. It is our actual behavior, that is, it is our capabilities, moral character, and special talents that are being judged. Ultimately, then, it is our own behavior that determines positive or negative inputs to our self-esteem. To illustrate this, let's look again at the three perspectives.

In William James' view, self-esteem equals the ratio of successes to pretensions. What, however, will determine whether a person succeeds or fails at a task he or she aspires to achieve? Clearly, the greater the person's competence, along with the degree of effort and persistence, the higher the likelihood of success. Thus, other things being equal, the individual's own behavior (competence + effort) will determine the ratio of successes to pretensions.

Returning to the "Looking Glass Self," the view that self-esteem is the result of internalizing the evaluative attitudes of others, we must ask, on what are the attitudes of others based? When people hold us in high esteem, they do so for a reason. They have judged us based on who we are and how we present ourselves. In the work place, criteria would relate to competence at our jobs. Are we responsible? Do we do a good job? In the social realm: Are we socially desirable people? What about our moral character? Are we honest? Compassionate? Altruistic? In short, the judgments of others, whether colleagues, friends, acquaintances, employers, or relatives, do not occur in a vacuum. *It is the evaluation of our own behavior that, through the process of social interaction, is fed back to us in the form of the "reflected appraisals" of others, or the "Looking Glass Self."*

Finally, with respect to social comparison processes, the outcome of comparing how well we are doing with how others are doing in any particular situation will depend on our competence relative to the others in the appropriate reference group.

In summary, both our personal assessments of the ratio of successes to pretensions and the evaluative judgments

by others are based on our actual behavior. If we want to have high self-esteem, then, we must behave in ways that will earn our own positive self-evaluations, as well as positive evaluations from others. (There are, of course, exceptions to these general theoretical principles and these complexities are discussed later in sections titled "Self-Protective Mechanisms" and "Obstacles to the Development of Self-Esteem.")

I want to emphasize here the truly interactive and interdependent nature of our social behavior. Our actual behavior, our sense of competence, and the evaluative judgments of others are inextricably woven elements of self-esteem which exert continuous influence on each other in the organization and expression of our behavior. The interactive nature of these three elements and their joint influences on our choices, actions, and self-esteem is illustrated by Robert White in his book, *The Abnormal Personality*:

High ability offers a fairly reliable line along which the person can function with growing ease and mastery. In the sphere of his excellence, he repeatedly enjoys the experience of competence and thus provides his self-esteem with a strong inner source. It may be that no one in his environment will admire his particular kind of talent, in which case it is not likely to become a central pillar in his self-esteem. More commonly his ability will bring social as well as intrinsic rewards, and his development will then be guided by an efficient selective principle: he can begin to select the groups and the companions whose esteem he will seek and value; he no longer has to care about the esteem of every "bunch" in his high school; he need only receive the esteem of the "bunch" that is keen on science, for example. 4

It can be seen, then, that our strong needs for affiliation can shape our choice for the creative expression of our abilities and talents, and vice versa. We may forsake a primary passion because it is not one that is valued by others whose friendship and esteem we seek. Conversely, to some degree, we will select others for our friends because they share our interests and values and will support

us in the work, study, or play of our choice.

The interdependent nature of the inner and outer source of information for self-esteem should not be underestimated. The internal source of evaluation provides intrinsic satisfaction, the external source of evaluation provides extrinsic satisfaction, and both interactively influence each other to affect our behavior because both are necessary for our self-esteem.

It is critical to self-esteem that we are able to achieve some area of success somewhere, for our abilities will not only bring us personal satisfaction, but they will provide a basis for earning acceptance and approval from others. If we lack the means by

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which to earn positive judgments from ourselves for efficacious action, we also lack the means by which to elicit favorable judgments from others. This leaves us at the mercy of arbitrarily bestowed approval at the same time that we are much more dependent on this external source of approval because we lack the means to achieve personal gratification. As William Silverberg has noted in *Childhood Experience and Personal Destiny*, "Unhappy and insecure is the man who, lacking an adequate inner source for self-esteem, must depend for this almost wholly upon external

sources.... It is the condition seen by the psychotherapist almost universally among his patients."

Self-Protective Mechanisms

Both psychologists and sociologists concur that few activities or interests engage our lives so profoundly as our needs to both protect and enhance our self-esteem. For example, Morris Rosenberg, in his book, *Conceiving the Self*, argues that the defense mechanisms first described by Freud are largely employed in the service of self-esteem enhancement and protection. Our self-enhancement and self-protective needs influence what we say, how we act, where we direct our energies, and how we perceive, process, and recall information.

With respect to William James' model, our defense mechanisms may cause us to set our aspirations so low as always to be able to achieve them. We can discount failures in areas that have little importance to us, and we can focus our energies on areas in which we know that we are likely to do well. As we react to the evaluative judgments of others, we can perceive these judgments to be prejudiced or made too hastily without adequate information. We can also choose to associate with people who we know think well of us. We can misperceive the judgments others have of us, believing that they hold us in higher esteem than, in fact, they do; we can discount the judgments of others by discounting their credibility; and we can devalue negative judgments of our capabilities in areas of little importance to us. The process of making self-attributions based on our performances is quite selective and favorably biased. Do we attribute a low grade on a test to our low ability or to an unfair or badly constructed test? Did we lose at tennis because we played poorly or because our opponent played well, our racket needed new strings, or the sun was in our eyes? With respect to social comparison processes, we can select people with whom to compare ourselves so as to ensure that we will compare favorably.

The tendency to present oneself in a favorable light both to ourselves and others is a well documented finding in social science research. In fact, the operation of selectivity in defense of self-esteem is considered to be so significant that many researchers have postulated that the major difference between people with high and low self-esteem is the operation of a good system of defenses. It is a fundamental characteristic of the human mind that we are capable of denial, distortion, and self-deception.

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Although the myriad mechanisms of defense are effective, they cannot protect us in all cases. There are certain objective facts about ourselves and our capabilities that cannot be denied. For example, if we consistently receive low grades in school, we cannot think of ourselves as a good student. We may be free to choose our friends, but we cannot choose our parents, teachers, neighbors, employers, or colleagues.

Domains of Self-Judgments and Judgments of Others: The Achievement Motive

We have seen that the process of self-esteem involves evaluative judgments. Next, we must ask: What are the criteria used by ourselves and others in making these judgments? These criteria stem from the cultural values in society. They vary from society to society and from subculture to subculture within a society. In mainstream American society, achievement is highly valued. Achievement provides both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. We feel efficacious and receive positive inputs to our self-esteem if we achieve in areas that are considered important in our society. But what kinds of achieve-

ment are valued? Traditionally, in mainstream American society, there have been two socially valued domains of achievement: competence and morality.

Competence Domain

Demonstrated competence in one or more areas valued by society, and important to us personally, is the criterion for success that has received the most attention in theoretical efforts to understand self-esteem. If we experience successes in the competence domain, we receive both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, we feel efficacious, and we tap into the physiologically pleasurable experience of self-efficacy that I described earlier. There is another set of values in American society, however, that has major importance for our self-esteem, namely, moral character. The virtues of honesty, compassion, justice, altruism, integrity, and concern for the welfare of others are at issue here. This relationship between moral integrity and self-esteem is much less understood than that between competence and self-esteem.

Moral Integrity

The degree to which we experience a sense of moral integrity is based on the congruence between our beliefs about what is right and wrong and our actual behavior. What I am speaking of here is the foundation of self-respect.

Our beliefs about what is right and wrong stem from our cultural values. As Americans, we have been exposed to a particular set of values and beliefs about how we ought to live our lives in order to be a "good" person. To varying degrees, Americans have adopted these values because we were taught by parents, teachers, and clergy to uphold them, because they are part of our heritage (they form the basis of the Constitution of the United States), and because they, *prima facie*, have an inherent "rightness" and "goodness" to them. They have the compelling ring of truth.

I am not raising a philosophical question here about the nature of

morality, or how we ought to behave. Rather, I am describing a social psychological process. In American society, we are taught a set of traditional moral values, and when these are internalized, they have a governing effect on our behavior.

"To have moral integrity is to have a respect for oneself such that certain actions are precluded."

Not everyone, however, internalizes this particular set of values. Some individuals, for instance, members of delinquent gangs or criminals, have rejected the values of mainstream America and have adopted an alternative code of ethics that guides their lives. Others, for example, sociopaths like Ted Bundy, appear to have internalized no moral code, at least not as most of us understand such a code.

To have moral integrity is to have a respect for oneself such that certain actions are precluded. If we have an internalized set of moral values, we will be motivated to live up to this moral ideal, for if we do not, we will suffer the emotionally painful consequences of violating our self-value. Our self-esteem will suffer, even if we are assessed, by ourselves and others, as being competent, and by others, but not ourselves, as being moral.

While individuals will vary in their beliefs about what is right and wrong, at any given point in time we are guided by a set of standards or principles which serve to prescribe and proscribe certain actions. In the words of social psychologist Albert Bandura,

After people adopt a code of conduct, when they perform inadequately or violate their standards, they tend to engage in self-critical or other distressing trains of thought. Anticipated, thought-produced distress over faulty behavior provides an internal incentive to abide by personal standards of performance.

In other words, our internalized moral values generate a kind of constructive

guilt which precludes certain actions.

In addition to inhibiting certain behavior, our personal moral standards also serve as an impetus to engage in certain actions, because failure to perform behaviors dictated by our personal standards also results in negative emotions. For example, in a social psychological study of individuals who had volunteered to donate blood marrow, subjects reported that they had volunteered because they felt morally obliged to help and would have felt guilty if they had not.⁴ Similarly, a substantial amount of social psychological research has shown that people will engage in altruistic behavior because it is personally rewarding. It feels good to help others.⁵

Although it is clear that people engage in selfish acts because they are rewarding, it is also true that because we are capable of empathy, we often find ourselves in situations in which it is in our best interest to sacrifice a direct gain for ourselves in order to help others. In such instances, the reward value of an empathetic reaction exceeds the reward value of a selfish act. For example, we may divert our efforts from achieving a self-interested goal to helping another who is suffering because we can empathetically experience the other's pain. As a consequence, our empathetic discomfort at witnessing the other's pain is not only alleviated, it is replaced with the positive feelings that result from altruistic action. In other words, the reward value of the altruistic act exceeds the reward that would have been experienced had the personal goal been achieved. If we routinely take the time and effort to consider the welfare of others, we will experience intrinsic rewards for our moral actions and we will have a basis for self-respect. Others, too, will judge us positively for our altruistic actions.

The intimate relationship between morality and self-approval was captured by Nietzsche in the following statement:

Moral feelings are...those feelings of approval or disapproval quite distinct and unlike any other feelings whose appearance in our consciousness tells us we are making a moral judgment.

To say that individuals have adopted a set of personal moral standards does not mean that they will always live up to them, but rather that they will experience self-condemnation if they do not. It appears that people guide their behavior by maintaining a cumulative balance between their actual behavior and their personal moral beliefs, and it is an assessment of the ratio of one's cumulative moral successes and failures that affects one's general level of self-esteem. This evaluation process is similar to James' model of self-esteem in which one's self-assessment derives from the ratio of one's successes to pretensions.

The self-evaluative processes in the morality and competence domains have many similarities. For example, if situational pressures have led individuals to violate personal standards with respect to moral behavior, or if they have failed to meet personal standards for competent performance, they will experience negative affect and will be motivated to engage in behaviors that will alleviate their discomfort. For instance, individuals might engage in helping behavior to relieve their negative mood state because altruistic actions will generate positive self-feelings. If there is no opportunity to engage in behavior that will bring relief and thus restore self-esteem, we might engage in a variety of rationalizations to justify our transgressions, such as "diffusion of responsibility," or "blaming the victim." Or we may simply recall several instances in which we were exemplary within the morality domain, thereby generating positive self-feelings that will counteract the negative self-feelings caused by the recent transgression or failure.

Personal evaluations in both the competence and morality domains are more accurate, and thus more meaningful for self-esteem, than the evaluations of others because only

individuals themselves can know the correspondence between their performance and their personal expectations in the competence domain, despite the approval of others. And only individuals can know whether they performed a particular moral act in order to make a good impression or to live up to personally held standards. Those individuals who are, through their actual behavior, able to meet personal standards in both the competence and morality domains, as well as earn the positive evaluation of others, in both domains, are those who will have the highest self-esteem.

The relationship between moral behavior and self-esteem is similar to that between competence and self-esteem with respect to the interactive and interdependent nature of our personal evaluations, the evaluations of others, and their joint influence on our behavior. For instance, when placed in a situation where our inner beliefs about the right course of action conflict with the beliefs of others whose evaluations are necessary for our self-esteem, we may mold our behavior to fit the beliefs or wishes of these significant others. This process, however, is a function of the compelling nature of our moral beliefs versus the importance of peer acceptance and approval. Thus, individuals may violate personal standards against stealing when friends pressure them to take apples from a nearby orchard; however, they will not be pressured into stealing an unattended handbag, a more serious transgression.

For individuals who have a strong sense of self and internalized moral beliefs, the emotionally compelling desire to preserve one's moral integrity will prevail even though situational pressures are powerful and life-threatening. This is poignantly conveyed in *A Man For All Seasons* when Sir Thomas More refuses to save his life by swearing to an oath declaring Henry VIII the head of the church in England:

[To his daughter] When a man takes an oath, Meg, he's holding his own self in

his own hands. Like water. And if he opens his fingers then — he needn't hope to find himself again.

Both the morality and competence domains are similar in that they operate within the achievement-failure framework prevalent in our society. When the process of achievement evaluation is applied to moral behavior, we are concerned with the consequences of meeting or failing to meet a moral challenge. What is being tested here is one's will. *Failure to meet a moral challenge results in personal feelings of inadequacy and weakness, and, as noted earlier, a violated sense of self-value. Conversely, meeting or exceeding one's moral expectations results in a sense of personal pride and accomplishment, that is, feelings of self-efficacy in the morality domain.*

It should be clear at this point that the competence and morality domains of self-esteem involve relatively independent evaluations which produce qualitatively different affective experiences. That is, there is a difference between tests of competence (mastering the physical and social environment) and tests of will (mastering the self).

One's demonstrated competence leads to a sense of confidence in one's abilities to achieve aspirations, that is, a sense of self-security, or faith in one's ability to meet the challenges of survival. By contrast, adherence to one's personally held ethical standards allows one to have self-respect, to think of one's self as a "good" and "decent" person. To state the point another way, the affective experience of achievement in the two domains is different. The pleasure we experience from the purchase of, say, a new BMW (assuming we are able to make the purchase because of our success in the competence domain) is quite different from the pleasure we receive from successfully meeting a moral challenge.

Competence and moral integrity can, therefore, be viewed as independent and somewhat interchangeable sources of self-esteem. When

feeling inadequate or inferior in one domain, individuals may look to the other to nourish self-esteem. For example, individuals who are, in general, lacking in competencies (e.g., intellectual, physical, or social) may develop their moral selves, making community service and altruistic actions a primary role in their lives. They may thereby derive an adequate level of self-esteem from exemplary adherence to their personal ethical standards. When personal standards are strictly adhered to, despite the benefits that might accrue from transgressions, we can experience moral pride and satisfaction through moral achievement in order to compensate for the inability to earn self-esteem through competent performance.

I have focused on the similarities between the competence and morality components, but there are important differences. Being a "competent" and "successful" person can be very different from being a "good" and "decent" person. One can be extremely competent, yet immoral. This difference becomes evident when we consider that achieving goals and aspirations in the domain of competence can interfere with adherence to personal moral standards, thereby resulting in professional and personal conflict. Such conflict occurs frequently in business transactions and competitive sports. Ambitious drives for status, money, and power, the socially endorsed symbols of competence and achievement, often overshadow our intentions of being a "good" and "decent" person.

The negative consequences for our well-being resulting from the conflicting societal pressures to achieve in the competence versus morality domains was vividly portrayed recently in the book, *Habits of the Heart*, by Robert Bellah and others, which is a study of the fundamental values of contemporary American society. The authors of this book show that the American values of individual achievement (defined by the authors in terms of career success and the acquisition of material wealth) and those of more moral concern, such as

community involvement and concern for the common good, have a strong tradition in our country. These two values used to be of equal importance as guides for us to live by. Now, however, much greater emphasis is placed on individual achievement. As a result, in many cases the definition of "success" and what it means to live the "good life" now consists only of whatever advances our personal economic condition.

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By contrast, the fundamental criterion of success for America's early colonizers, the Puritans, was not material wealth but the creation of a community in which a genuinely ethical and spiritual life could be lived. Subsequently, the civic republicanism espoused by Thomas Jefferson defined the "good self" in terms of the independent citizen who, through proper education, could simultaneously make a good living and actively participate in public life by participating in government. Until recently, then, the biblical and civic republican traditions, reflecting moral concern and commitment, were as influential for American aspirations as the value of individual achievement.

The authors of *Habits of the Heart* attribute this shift in values to the economic, technological, and political transformations of our postwar capitalist economy. In their analysis, the objectives of the corporation and the marketplace have come to define the "good self" and the "good life" in terms of the values of a consumer

producer ideal. As a result, what is "good" for us personally has changed such that it is now also what facilitates the production and consumption of products and the maintenance of America's place in the world economy. This shift to a wholehearted pursuit of career success, financial gain, and gratification of personal desires, referred to in the book as "hyperindividualism," has occurred at the expense of honoring the traditional values of more moral concern.

Coinciding with this shift in values, as the authors show, has been an increase in the malaise and discontents of American citizens. Consistent with the analysis of self-esteem presented in this essay, a major source of this increased malaise is the fact that, although we, as American citizens, have adopted a set of moral values and beliefs which compel us to live a certain way, we are not living in accord with them. The everyday pressures of "survival" in a highly competitive and complex technological world, supported by a shift in the priorities of our governing values, causes us to neglect this important dimension of our lives. The result is a deeply felt personal dissatisfaction and disorientation. (There are, of course, other contributors to the increased malaise and discontents of American society.)

In an effort to alleviate our discomfort, we have turned to the profession of psychotherapy to find solace. The same people who have tried unsuccessfully to assuage their feelings of emptiness and dissatisfaction by purchasing expensive cars, beautiful homes, and exotic vacations are filling therapists' offices. The institution of psychotherapy has become so popular that ours has been branded by Philip Reiff as the "Therapeutic Society." As the authors of *Habits of the Heart* show, however, the morally neutral language of the therapeutic context only reinforces the values of "hyperindividualism."

It is a matter of no small interest that what we have learned to do in order to assuage our anxiety and depression results in increasing the

profits of our entrepreneurial society. In a relatively short period, Americans have changed from a Victorian character manifested in a deeply felt need to save money and possess the virtues of integrity, honesty, and modesty to a much more flamboyant character manifested in a desperate need to spend money, indulge desires and impulses, and actualize our fullest potential. This change is intimately related to (in fact necessary for the support of) post-war American economy."

The Importance of Physical Attractiveness to Self-Esteem

Physical attractiveness is a third domain of importance to self-esteem in our society, one which has been greatly exploited by the advertising and marketing industries. But it is different from competence and moral integrity in that the praise, approval, and special benefits one receives due to physical appearance are not earned, but rather are the result of a random occurrence, or purchased at not inconsiderable expense. Hence, self-esteem based only on physical beauty is artificial; that is, it is not a function of one's developed skills or personal integrity (intrinsic factors) but is a function of luck, cosmetic surgery, and skilled application of make-up (extrinsic factors).

Beauty as a source of self-esteem is also quite transient, given the emphasis on youthful beauty in American society. For instance, beauty may be a source of self-esteem for a young woman, but if it is her only source, how can she feel self-confident when she is dependent on something that she knows will lessen with age? Receiving acceptance, approval, and special benefits for one's beauty can create personal conflict for women who have internalized the more intrinsic values of earned achievement in the competence and moral domains. Such conflict was witnessed in one young woman, a former model and beauty contest winner, who rebelled at the tradition of women being treated as objects or commodities in a

meat market. She fashioned a bathing suit out of steaks sewn together and picketed a Miss America Contest.

The Mediating Effects of Personal Control

The issue of personal control is critically important for self-esteem because it plays a crucial role in the self-evaluative processes in both the competence and morality domains.

"Taking responsibility for one's life is essential to developing a sense of efficacy and thus self-esteem."

We can be exceptionally competent, able to achieve desired outcomes in the physical and social worlds and yet not experience high self-esteem because we do not perceive ourselves to be in control of our lives. This phenomenon is best illustrated by an example from George Vaillant's book, *Adaptation to Life*, a longitudinal study of Harvard undergraduates:

After a decade of winning merit badge after merit badge, Dr. Carson obtained academic tenure. He became an Associate Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School. Once obtained, however, this badge of academic acceptance, his title-on-the-door, brought little satisfaction. Instead, Dr. Carson became so depressed over his marriage and career that he considered suicide.

This seemingly paradoxical situation is due to "the price that Dr. Carson had to pay for choosing an identity that his father, not he, had selected."

We experience an intrinsically rewarding sense of satisfaction from making our own decisions and choices in any given situation and in our awareness that we are responsible for the direction our lives are taking. *Our need to be in control of our lives, to make decisions and choices, seems to be a fundamental characteristic of what it means to be human, and it is intimately related to our sense of self-efficacy.* With respect to moral behavior, a true test of one's

will, that is, experiencing a personally felt moral challenge, is a test of personal control.

The process of personally choosing a course of action can be rewarding apart from the actual success, and in spite of failure. Research within the field of personality shows that when people are denied the opportunity to be self-determining, they lose motivation, their performance and learning becomes impaired, they become ill, and in some cases they may die. *Taking responsibility for one's life is essential to developing a sense of self-efficacy and thus self-esteem.*

We can, of course, perceive ourselves to be in control of our lives, making our own decisions and choices, and yet still have low self-esteem. This is likely to occur if we come to conclude that we have made a bad decision or wrong choice, and we have no valid excuse strong enough to fall back on to soften our self-criticism.

Authenticity and Self-Esteem

The concepts of personal control, tests of will, and self-respect are intimately related to the notion of authenticity, of living a life that is true to one's self. Authenticity, a construct given considerable attention by existentialist philosophers, concerns our strivings for coherence in our beliefs, meanings, and understandings of our self and the world. *We have a powerful need to believe that the world is a meaningful place and that we, ourselves, are meaningful.*

Authenticity and personal control most frequently come into play within the moral domain of self-esteem and constitute the fundamental processes from which our self-respect is derived. *When we do not live in accord with our moral beliefs, we do violence to our personal integrity, or self-meaning.* But authenticity and personal control affect our self-worth in the competence domain as well, as was illustrated by the case of the Harvard Medical School professor, Dr. Carson, who paid the personally painful cost of not having lived a life that was true to his self.



It is not always easy to live authentically — to adhere to the dictates of our moral beliefs and to strive to achieve our aspirations. It often takes a good deal of personal courage. *The importance to self-esteem, however, of living authentically cannot be over-emphasized. The phrase "we must have the courage of our convictions" reflects our common understanding of the importance of personal control and will to our sense of authenticity and thus our self-respect and self-esteem.*

Stability of Self-Esteem

A cumulative history of the ratio of successes to failures, across time and social settings, provides us with a relatively stable set of self-knowledge. Our self-knowledge and our need to protect and enhance our self-esteem affect our generalized expectancies for success in performance situations, and, therefore, influence how well we perform.

Our self-concept may be modified by new experiences and new information; however, when new information is incongruent with our conception of self, it is weighed against our existing frame of reference. For example, individuals with high self-esteem are not likely to experience a drop in self-esteem due to a single incident of negative feedback (from either self or others). Rather, this new information is assimilated within the perspective of our past performance history. One's stable self-evaluation will usually change through a consistent pattern of negative or positive feedback, or, sometimes, by an extreme failure.

People will differ in stability of self-esteem based on whether they have more of an internal versus external locus of control and whether they have a predominantly inner source for self-esteem. If we cannot draw on an inner source for self-esteem, whether it derives from achievement in the competence or morality domain, we become much more dependent on the approval and acceptance of others. Our self-esteem is then at the mercy of arbitrary judgments that may

be based on unrealistically high standards or prejudiced beliefs.

Obstacles to the Development of Self-Esteem

There are a variety of obstacles external to the individual that can significantly limit our opportunities for the kind of efficacious action that builds self-esteem. These obstacles include such social structural variables as social class, race, ethnicity, gender, status, and family socialization practices. A few examples will illustrate their importance to self-esteem.

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Because a college education is expensive, one's social class may significantly limit one's opportunities to receive an advanced degree, not to mention an advanced degree from a prestigious university, thereby limiting one's occupational aspirations and achievements. *Educational and occupational status, in turn, can significantly limit our opportunities to feel efficacious.* For example, workers of low social status are much less likely to hold positions in which they function autonomously, making decisions and assuming responsibility for product outcomes. Instead, their jobs are generally routine, and they are obliged to obey, conform, and follow rules set by others. Hence, the opportunities for these employees to express personal control and to feel efficacious are quite restricted by comparison to occupations of higher status.

Although, in general, our personal judgments will concur with the judgments of others, because both are based on the same observable behavior, this will not be the case when

judgments are prejudiced. Others' judgments of us, and important decisions made on the basis of these judgments (e.g., employment, promotion, admittance to college, etc.) may be prejudiced, based on color, ethnicity, gender, and status, rather than on our actual behavior, capabilities, or attributes. These kinds of biased assessments can impact us from childhood on, not only by limiting our opportunities but by affecting us directly through the "self-fulfilling prophecy" effects commonly witnessed in grade school classrooms.

One of the most significant obstacles to high self-esteem is a dysfunctional family environment. *Because parents have a virtual monopoly on our first cognitions, understandings of the world, and self-feelings, they set the stage for the positive or negative unfolding of the rest of our lives.* As children, we experience our parents as omnipotent and omniscient and, for good or ill, a significant amount of learning about the world and ourselves occurs within this overarching belief system. If our parents love and acknowledge us, we have a basis for positive self-esteem; if they disparage, discount, or abandon us, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that we are unworthy.

Indeed, for many psychologists, self-esteem is considered to be at the heart of the neurotic process, which process is considered to stem from the parent-child relationship. These psychologists argue that the development of neurosis can always be traced to a set of circumstances which have instilled in the child a self-derogatory feeling. On the one hand, a feeling of weakness or inadequacy prevents children from seeking and achieving experiences of mastery and, on the other, children feel that there is something wrong with them and that, therefore, they cannot be loved.

These self-derogatory messages, internalized by the child, stem from his or her experience of disapproval and rejection from parents. Because, as children, we experience our parents as omnipotent and omniscient, it is understandable that we would,

more often than not, conclude that if they do not love us, it must be because we are bad or unworthy. We have no other explanation. We experience ourselves as responsible for how our parents treat us.

These feelings are deeply ingrained and are carried with us at least as long as the conditions which created them remain the same. The longer these conditions prevail, the more entrenched the self-derogatory feelings become. Eventually, these feelings become so ingrained that they become habitual, a part of us, and we may never have the occasion to question their origin or legitimacy.

"One of the most significant obstacles to high self-esteem is a dysfunctional family environment."

Individuals who have internalized these self-derogatory messages often suffer another negative consequence of a dysfunctional family environment — they continue, in a futile effort, to seek the love, acknowledgement, and approval of their parents. They still believe that if only they were "good" enough, if only they could accomplish enough, their parents would finally come to love and acknowledge them.

Many adults, indeed a substantial number of those who seek therapeutic help, are unable to shake the misguided belief that their happiness, well-being, and thus self-esteem depend on receiving the approval and acknowledgement of their parents. Even though many of these individuals may be functioning fairly successfully in both the morality and competence domains of behavior, they experience a persistent, nagging sense of unworthiness. Happiness and self-esteem are likely to elude these individuals if they do not receive the help that they need to understand that their belief in the necessity of their parents' love and acknowledgement is erroneous.

Often, such individuals continue to lead their lives in an unending and futile effort to achieve their parents' approval. They may never take over the control of their lives from their parents, as was the case for Dr. Carson, who let his father choose his career. Sharing control of our lives with our parents can have devastating effects on our self-esteem because it prohibits us from the feelings of self-efficacy and authenticity that come with making our own decisions. It thus undermines our personal integrity. *It is indeed ironic that an action that we take in a desperate attempt to enhance our self-esteem — attempting to earn the approval and recognition of our parents — can actually undermine it.*

The problem here is that people are caught up in the habitual operation of an erroneous belief system, one that was misguided from the beginning. Although it is understandable that as children we would draw the conclusion that somehow we must be bad or unworthy if our parents do not love us, as adults, ideally we would recognize that our parents are fallible. They are human, they make mistakes, they live and act within a context that has its own pressures, conflicts, demands, and crises. They are not omnipotent and omniscient and they never were.

If our parents were unable to provide us with the supportive environment that we needed, it was because of their own particular set of circumstances, not because of anything that we did as an infant. Whether due to lack of involvement, awareness, or experience, our parents were responsible for their actions towards us, for how they treated us. We were simply wrong to assume that if they mistreated us, it must have been our own fault.

We must put our childhood experiences in proper perspective. If our needs for love, acknowledgement, and acceptance were not met, we were unfortunate. Nevertheless, what happened, however painful, is in the past. We must understand that the negative impact that these early expe-

riences have on our self-esteem is inappropriate and unrealistic because our feelings were formed within a limited and erroneous belief system.

It is not easy to change beliefs and emotions that were deeply ingrained so long ago. They have become a significant part of our self-definition and way of living in the world. For some individuals, reading an article such as this will help them begin to break free of these habitual thought patterns and negative self-feelings. For others, it will be a much more difficult task, and they may require the help of a skilled therapist. In either case, it will be necessary to go through a process of critical self-reflection, which would enable us to become aware of our habitual emotional responses and automatic thought processes and how they govern our actions on a day-by-day basis. It will show us how they are, in turn, linked both to our low self-regard and to our early childhood experiences. Then, it is imperative that we undermine them systematically with the knowledge of their falseness.

Discussion and Conclusion: The Importance of Critical Thinking for Self-Esteem

Discussion

At the beginning of this article, I said that the key to self-esteem is active involvement with and effective use of our self-powers. I have tried to make this statement concrete by describing the kinds of activities that we are likely to find ourselves involved in as we use our self-powers: namely, striving for achievement in the competence and morality domains of behavior. The importance to self-esteem of personal control, will power, and living authentically was also discussed. A sense of self-efficacy, or confidence in one's abilities to achieve desired outcomes, based on a past history of successes in the competence and morality domains of behavior was presented as the key to self-esteem.

I want to be clear that it is not the outcome, the degree of success or

achievement that is the critical issue for self-esteem (although the actual achievement is important when viewed in proper perspective), but rather it is the fact that we are actively involved in using our mental and/or physical powers. Our sense of self-efficacy and thus self-esteem comes from actively engaging with the environment.

This point can best be illustrated with an example. One of my students at Saybrook Institute, Arthur Segal, is conducting his doctoral dissertation research on the experiences of people with serious physical disabilities. He is asking: What accounts for the fact that two people who have the same type and degree of physical limitations may radically differ in the way they live their lives, in their attitudes, self-definitions, and self-evaluations? One person accepts the label of "disabled" and the passivity and dependency that comes with this self-definition. The other is an active, productive, contributing member of society. The latter person has an optimistic attitude and positive self-feelings; the former does not.

Because of differences in their respective socialization experiences, these two individuals have developed contrasting self-definitions and, concomitantly, very different aspirations and goals. The latter person has accepted his or her condition and is living the fullest life possible. In other words, this person is actively engaged in the effective use of his or her self-powers (even though these are limited by comparison with non-physically-handicapped people), and such involvement is pleasurable, a source of self-efficacy and self-esteem. The former person is not actively engaged in using his or her self-powers and thus does not have opportunities to be efficacious. Consequently, he or she derives few inputs to self-esteem. *The critical issue here is self-acceptance. We must accept who we are, acknowledge our limitations, yet live the most active life possible.*

The dynamic described here, the joy that comes from active involvement with and effective use of one's

self-powers, is exactly the same dynamic portrayed earlier through the infant who learns that it is his or her own actions that caused the noises the rattle makes. It does not really matter what our capabilities are, but that we engage them fully. This is the key to self-esteem.

What Can Be Done to Increase Self-esteem?

How, then, can we augment our self-esteem? By increasing the likelihood that we will make effective use of our self-powers. How can we do this? By improving our ability to think critically. Critical thinking is actually a skill and, just like any skill, it can be improved through direct instruction, concentration, and practice.

*"How, then, can we
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By improving our ability
to think critically."*

If we take a moment to reflect on what we as Americans consider to be admirable virtues to possess — integrity, altruism, honesty, fairness, autonomy, competence, productiveness — we realize that achieving any of these virtues requires thought and effort. If we are to feel the pride and self-respect that come from accomplishment in these areas, we must recognize that such accomplishment is largely up to us.

Critical thinking is important to self-esteem because the more effectively we use our intelligence, the more likely we are to achieve in both the competence and morality domains of behavior. For example, as I have shown, the ratio of our successes to pretensions, a major determinant of self-esteem, is largely a function of our actual competence in doing any given task. This, in turn, is largely a function of the effective use of our intelligence, or critical thinking.

In the morality domain, critical thinking involves anticipating the consequences of our actions in any given situation, that is, thinking carefully

about the right course of action. Critical thinking will reduce the likelihood that our thoughtlessness will cause us to make mistakes that inadvertently cause harm to others or to ourselves by violating our personal beliefs. First, we must use our ability to reason to determine the right course of action and then, we must have the self-discipline (personal control), perhaps the courage, to follow through on our decisions. The need for critical self-reflection here stems from our concern for moral integrity. For, if we lose our moral integrity, we know we have lost something significant — the stakes are high. The knowledge that we have made the best effort to determine the right course of action, and have acted in accord with our beliefs, gives us a deeply gratifying experience, buttressing our self-respect.

Critical thinking involves making an effort to be aware, to seek knowledge and information that is relevant to the everyday conduct of our lives. It involves making a commitment to make the most effective use of our knowledge and thinking abilities. In other words, it means making a commitment to live a rational life. When we make careful thinking and rational action priorities in our lives, we are thereby actively engaged in the world; that is, we are actively engaged in using our self-powers.

In summary, the extent of our achievement in both the competence and morality domains, and the experience of being actively engaged in the world, can be largely influenced by improving our critical thinking skills. How can this be done? We can begin the process of change by taking a course in critical thinking. Educators have become increasingly convinced of the need to teach students critical thinking skills. As a result, critical thinking courses are now offered at all California State University and Community College campuses (a course in critical thinking is now a requirement for graduation), and efforts are underway to infuse the teaching of critical thinking into all grade and middle school curricula. The ability to reason

abstractly, critically evaluate evidence, make sound judgments independently, and present the evidence and reasoning behind one's own opinions are thinking skills that are essential to the development of autonomous self-reliant citizens in a democratic society. These thinking skills also constitute the fundamental basis for the development of high self-esteem. Anyone can begin, at any time, to live more actively and effectively in the world. We have the power within ourselves to change ourselves and therefore our self-esteem.

When we consider that our minds are our fundamental means of survival, it becomes clear why someone who cannot rely on his or her own decision-making abilities, who cannot trust himself or herself to know and do the right thing, who has no faith in his or her ability to attract friends and find and maintain intimate relationships, is resigned to live in a perpetual state of anxiety, insecurity, and low self-esteem. *We come to see, in other words, that effective use of our minds is also important to the fulfillment of our hearts.*

What Kinds of Actions Will Not Increase Self-Esteem?

Along with the creation of the California State Self-Esteem Task Force has come a plethora of programs purporting to raise self-esteem. Unfortunately, most of these programs have been developed by people who know little about the nature and dynamics of self-esteem. Most of these workshops or seminars contain exercises such as the following: The workshop leader asks for a volunteer from the audience who then stands at the front of the room while the workshop leader instructs the audience to give a big round of applause to "Jane Doe." If you have been persuaded by the arguments in this essay, you will have already discerned that this exercise will not be effective in changing someone's self-esteem. Not only is this kind of exercise ineffective, it seriously misleads participants and can even be damaging to self-esteem.

The message conveyed by this

exercise is that self-esteem is an experience; it is the experience of receiving arbitrary recognition and approval from others, approval that is not contingent on the participant's actions. The applause is unauthentic and so is the transient experience of being admired. The applause occurred only because the workshop leader engineered it. When the participant returns to the real world, he or she is left with only the echo of this applause and no understanding of how he or she might earn this type of recognition in the future.

Moreover, to the extent that the participant experienced the applause as pleasurable, he or she is automatically placed in an existential dilemma. *When we allow ourselves to receive praise for something we have not done, to enjoy accolades that we do not deserve, we are guilty of presenting ourselves in 'bad faith,' the state of 'falseness' that Sartre has spoken of so compellingly.*

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Other exercises focus on "the power of positive thinking." Participants are instructed to visualize themselves as successful, or to look in the mirror each morning and repeat affirmations extolling their many virtues — their intelligence, their worth, their power, their attractiveness. These affirmations will do nothing to improve self-esteem; however, they may very well ensure that the person will never increase his or her self-esteem because they encourage people to live in their heads, in fantasy, rather than in the world.

A third type of exercise is especially geared toward those whose low self-esteem stems from the lack of love, recognition, and acknowledge-

ment from parents and whose need to fill this void is still governing their lives. The workshop leader will ask for two volunteers from the audience who will take turns role-playing themselves as a child while their partner plays their parent. The person enacting the part of the child is asked to think for a few moments and then to state the sentiments that he or she has always wanted to hear from the parent. The partner is then asked to role-play the parent saying these words to the child. Often, the person role-playing the child upon hearing these words, will break down and cry and the empathetic partner may begin to cry as well. The two are subsequently asked to shift roles, or two new volunteers are secured and the process is repeated.

Exercises like these are particularly destructive to the participants because they reinforce the existence of an erroneous belief system that is the source of a great deal of unnecessary pain, unhappiness, and dysfunction. Participants fully re-experience the pain of never having received the longed for love and acknowledgment, and both the distressing memory of this unmet need and the current longing for the need are simultaneously reinforced. Consequently, a festering wound is not allowed to heal. (Unfortunately, these kinds of exercises are also often carried out in many therapists' offices.)

What these individuals need is, first, help in understanding the external source of their self-derogatory feelings and the erroneous nature of their belief; and, second, help in breaking their habitual thought processes and emotional responses. They need to be set free from an erroneous belief system that keeps them locked in a vicious cycle of low self-esteem.

What these kinds of self-esteem workshops have in common is that their leaders are selling a "quick fix" to increase self-esteem. They appeal to people's desperate needs to find love and acceptance, to feel competent and worthwhile, and to have self-respect. But self-esteem cannot be changed easily, nor can it be changed

by artificially orchestrating recognition and approval.

Often, in the seminars that I give on the nature and development of self-esteem, members in the audience will lament that they should be able to have high self-esteem, without having to *do anything*, that *they are not their behavior*, and that they should have value and worth simply because they are human beings.

"...much of the system of values operating in American society today is destructive to our well-being."

I hear the following kind of statement: "I should be able to feel good about myself simply because I am me, not because I am *judged* to be of value by someone else or by myself." I respond by saying that having high self-esteem simply because one exists might be possible in a different world, but not this one. We should consider ourselves to have value and we should be self-accepting, however, that is not what is meant in our language by the term self-esteem.

We live in a world in which we are constantly making judgments, and we have criteria for these judgments. We hire not just anyone for a job, but the "best" or most qualified person. We do not form friendships with just anyone we meet, but choose those who have what we consider to be desirable characteristics. We do not eat at just any restaurant when we go out to dinner, but choose a restaurant that we know serves good food. We are continually making evaluations, and self-esteem, as a term in our language, refers to the affective experience of applying this evaluation process to ourselves. We engage in this process because we do, in fact, want to be creatures of value in a world of evaluations.

What I am describing in this article is how this self-evaluative process operates, given the value and belief systems within American society. I am not advocating this evaluative

process or that value system. I am simply analyzing and describing it. The fact is that I believe that much of the system of values operating in American society today is destructive to our well-being. The main reason for writing an article such as this is to draw attention to this system, its nature and processes, and how they affect our lives so that we can make a conscious decision about whether we want to continue to allow our lives to be shaped by these forces.

Conclusion

I have described what I have come to see as the nature and dynamics of self-esteem. I maintain that the processes and components of self-esteem derive from the context or value system (culture) within which we live. And, finally, I have described how a shift in the values of American society (especially within the last fifty years) has placed us in a "no win" situation with respect to self-esteem. The everyday pressures of survival in a highly competitive and complex world that defines success and the "good life" in terms of the acquisition of material wealth causes us to neglect and, at times, violate an important dimension of our self-definition: namely, the moral dimension. As a result, many of us suffer from a prevailing sense of emptiness and chronic low self-esteem.

It was with considerable foresight that the California State Legislature, at the time it moved to establish the State Task Force on Self-Esteem, decided to name this task force the California State Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and *Personal and Social Responsibility*. As I have shown, personal and social responsibility are two fundamental components of self-esteem. What we do for the good of others is also good for us. The degree to which we achieve that which is good for both others and ourselves is, in large part, a function of the degree to which we take personal responsibility for our actions and exert personal control over our lives.

The arguments that I have presented in this article are not new.

The same points were made by Plato. For Plato, the "good life" was a convergence between self-interest and moral obligation to the community. As Robert Nozick summarizes in his book, *Philosophical Explanations*:

Two further Platonic theses are that... a person's notion of self-interest will converge with the objective notion of value, so he will come to think (and feel) that he is best off being most valuable, and he will feel his interest lies in being valuable; also that his notions of morality and value will converge, so that he comes to think the most valuable life and the most moral one are one and the same.

Plato believed that this convergence would occur if the individual lived a life in accord with his or her beliefs about what constituted the best life and the moral life, and, additionally, if the individual included ongoing philosophical discussion of these initial beliefs about what constituted "bestness" and morality.

"As American citizens, we need to lead more examined and reflective lives."

It is not through conscious choice that we have come to this state of affairs in which the "good life" and the "good self" are defined in terms of corporate America's definition of the consumer-producer ideal. Rather, this value system which now governs our lives has come about as a function of the economic, political, and technological transformations of our American culture. As the authors of *Habits of the Heart* argue, it is time for us to stop and take stock of the set of values that is currently guiding our lives. We need to re-establish the tradition of carrying on a public discourse about what constitutes the "good life" and the "good self." As Nozick argues, the philosophical literature from Plato to Thoreau contains calls to re-examine and reorder our lives. He writes, "The process of philosophical reflection itself — like coming close to

death—produces a rethinking of goals, a reassessing of what really is important. This change of goals not only re-orders and re-ranks the old ones, it also excludes some, while introducing new ones." As American citizens, we need to lead more examined and reflective lives.

A COMPANION PIECE TO THIS ARTICLE ON THE DEVELOPMENT AND NURTURANCE OF SELF-ESTEEM WILL BE PUBLISHED AT A LATER DATE.

Susan Hales, Ph.D., is a commissioner on the Alameda County Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility. Her primary area of expertise is the nature and development of self-esteem, competence, and moral behavior. Her research on these topics has been carried out in association with the Institute of Human Development at the University of California at Berkeley. Dr. Hales is on the Executive Faculty of Saybrook Institute, where she teaches courses in social and developmental psychology, socialization and personality, critical thinking, and research methods.

NOTES:

1. In support of the Task Force's objectives, seven University of California professors have compiled the leading research documenting the relationship between self-esteem and a variety of social problems in a book titled *The Social Importance of Self-Esteem*, available from University of California Press, 2120 Berkeley Way, Berkeley, CA 94720 (1-800-822-6657 or 415-642-4247).

2. For the purposes of this discussion on self-esteem, the self, as distinguished from the self-concept and self-esteem, is seen as constituted of three components: process, content, and manifestation. Process refers to the fact that as human beings we have self-reflective cognitive capacity; that is, we are able to take ourselves as an object of observation and reflection. Content refers to the self-concept, our self-knowledge or self-understanding of the world and ourselves in relation to it. Manifestation refers to the way in which our self-reflective cognitive capacity, operating in conjunction with our self-knowledge manifests in the way we perceive, process, and recall information (at

times selectively and defensively), the way we feel, and the way we act. The manifestation of the self in social time and space is as that entity to which others perceive and respond, often referred to as our "person" or our "personality."

3. White, R. (1959). *Motivation reconsidered: The concept of competence*. *Psychological Review*, 66, 297-323.

4. Schwartz, S. (1970). *Moral decision-making and behavior*. In J. Macanly & L. Berkowitz (Eds.), *Altruism and helping behavior*. New York: Academic Press.

5. Cialdini, R. B., Darby, B. L., & Vincent, Y. E. (1973). Transgression and altruism: A case for hedonism. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 9, 502-516.

6. See Leary, T. (1983). *From Salvation to self-realization: Advertising and the therapeutic roots of the consumer culture, 1880-1930*. In R. Fox and T. Leary (Eds.), *The culture of consumption: Critical essays in American History, 1880-1980* (pp. 1-38). New York: Pantheon Books.

7. Deci, E. (1975). *Intrinsic Motivation*. New York: Plenum.

* A complete set of references is available from Saybrook Institute upon request.

‡ Much of the work referred to in this article was written prior to the sanctioning of the generalized use of the masculine pronoun *he* as sexist language. In the interest of historical accuracy, quotations are presented as originally written; it is suggested, however, that the reader substitute pronouns for both genders where only *he* occurs.



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National Meetings. It is further evident in the degree of liberty Saybrook gives to its students to shape their own graduate programs based upon their prior learning, and their mature aspirations. Saybrook strikes me as an extraordinarily adult institution in its conception, an exceptionally ambitious institution in the breadth of its vision, and an extraordinarily practical institution in its devotion to real, important, human qualities.

Saybrook is, in the opinion of this member of its Board, a gift from the small community that conceived, birthed, and nurtures it, to our larger civilization, which itself struggles to maintain its existence. The balancing, by any institution, of the needs of efficiency with the aspiration toward human fulfillment is a perilous business. An overly dominating concern with either the lone economic creature or with an ideological vision of society puts us out of spiritual balance and health. As Tocqueville sadly predicted for the future shape of democratic life, we have tended to become increasingly isolated in our freedom more at liberty than ever to exercise our own choices, but correspondingly led to spiritual separation from others. The very idea of community sometimes seems to have lost its force. It has, happily, not lost its force at Saybrook, which struggles, in its local and its national community, to live as a force for greater self-awareness and faith in our human being, and not merely to exist. Long may it live. And long may it have a justly lasting impact on our human community.

Harrison Sheppard is General Partner of Sheppard Artists' Representatives, Ltd. He recently completed a 22-year career as an attorney with the Federal Government to devote himself to representing a select number of internationally established visual artists. Mr. Sheppard currently is Of Counsel with the San Francisco law firm of Lagarias and Mason. He is also a frequent contributor to several Bay Area publications.

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